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ABSTRACT

A baseline study of Arizona public school counselors ascertained the amount of time they spent individually with students and the nature of the counseling provided; it also measured their opinions and attitudes toward school-to-work (STW). Surveys were mailed to every Arizona high school and junior high/middle school, a random sample of elementary schools, and a targeted sample of charter schools; 374 usable surveys were returned by the schools' guidance counselors and analyzed. Findings were compared with previously reported results for parents, businesses, teachers, and school administrators, as appropriate. Ninety percent of the counselors were aware of STW, compared with 83 percent of school administrators, 44 percent of teachers, 28 percent of parents, and 25 percent of businesses. More than half of counselors--similar to fellow educators--felt public education was either good or excellent. More than any other constituent group, they felt a need for schools to make either major or minor changes. Ninety-five percent believed a more comprehensive approach to education was needed. Counselors--similar to all other constituent groups--were uniformly supportive of proposed changes. They also supported changes in their own roles/responsibilities. The following barriers interfered with their ability to implement STW: lack of time, lack of funding/resources, lack of teacher support, lack of employment opportunities for students, and caseloads. (YLB)

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Arizona Counselors' Perceptions of School To Work: Baseline Results

Arizona School To Work Briefing Paper #5

January 1997

by

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In October 1995, Arizona received a School To Work (STW) implementation grant from the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education for the purpose of creating a comprehensive statewide system of school-to-work opportunities for Arizona students. Morrison Institute for Public Policy is coordinating a multifaceted evaluation of the state's STW initiative on behalf of the Governor's Division of School To Work (GDSTW). One component of the evaluation involves public awareness and opinions of STW as a concept and a vehicle for education reform. In spring 1996, a statewide public poll of parents, businesses and educators was conducted to establish baseline measures of public attitudes toward STW prior to its widespread implementation in the schools.¹ In fall 1996, Arizona public school counselors were surveyed as an additional constituent group.²

This briefing paper highlights findings from the state's baseline study of counselors' opinions toward STW—especially as compared with the opinions of other constituent groups who were polled in spring 1996. A more detailed report is forthcoming.

An Overview of the Counselor Survey

In collaboration with the GDSTW and an independent polling firm—Wright Consulting Services—Morrison Institute designed the counselor survey with two purposes in mind. First, the survey sought to ascertain the amount of time counselors spend one-on-one with students and the nature of the counseling provided.³ Second, the survey was designed to measure counselors' opinions and attitudes toward STW.

During fall 1996, 1000 counselor surveys were distributed. Surveys were mailed to every Arizona high

school and junior high/middle school, a random sample of elementary schools, and a targeted sample of charter schools (i.e., those serving older student populations) to the attention of the school's guidance counselor. A total of 374 usable surveys were returned and analyzed.

Responses are representative of counselors statewide. Responses include those from counselors in all 15 counties, in schools with varying student enrollments, and in all types of settings (e.g., elementary, junior/middle, high school). One-third of the respondents are men; two-thirds are women. Seventeen percent represent minorities. The results reported in this paper are statistically accurate at a 95% level of confidence and with a margin of error of ± 5.2 percentage points.

A Summary of Results

Results are discussed by topic. As appropriate, findings are presented as compared with previously reported results for parents, businesses, teachers, and school administrators (i.e., principals and superintendents).

Counselors' Awareness of the STW Initiative

Counselors were asked whether or not they had heard something (a lot or a little) about STW. Fully 90 percent of the counselors surveyed indicated they were aware of STW. This figure compares with 83 percent of school administrators, 44 percent of teachers, 28 percent of parents and 25 percent of businesses having heard something about STW. Higher levels of awareness among counselors most likely have to do with the fact that they were polled after local and state public information campaigns were initiated.

Readiness for Change

Three questions dealt with counselors' perceptions of and satisfaction with public education. Counselors first were asked to rate the overall quality of public school education. More than half of all counselors—similar to their fellow educators—feel that public education is either good or excellent (Table 1).

Table 1
Ratings of the quality of Arizona public education

	Excellent-Good	Fair	Poor-Very Poor
Parents	43%	39%	18%
Businesses	46%	33%	21%
Counselors	53%	40%	7%
Teachers	66%	28%	6%
Administrators	79%	18%	2%

*Administrators include principals and superintendents.

Counselors then were asked if they felt that schools need to change how they operate. More than any other constituent group, counselors feel a need for schools to make either major or minor changes (Table 2).

Table 2
Ratings of the need for changes in Arizona public education

	Degree of change needed		
	Major	Minor	None
Businesses	61%	33%	6%
Parents	54%	42%	4%
Counselors	50%	49%	1%
Teachers	43%	53%	4%
Administrators	35%	60%	5%

*Administrators include principals and superintendents.

Asked what kind of changes are needed—specifically in terms of back-to-basics or more comprehensive education including skills such as computer and work skills—95 percent of those surveyed believe a more comprehensive approach to education is needed.

Attitudes Toward Changes Embodied by STW

Counselors were informed that the STW initiative could result in significant changes (1) in how Arizona's public schools operate and (2) in counselors' roles. In terms of five ways in which schools might change, counselors—similar to all other constituent groups—were uniformly supportive of the proposed changes (see Table 3, next page). In fact, counselors are *more* supportive than other constituent groups of all changes except for one—their level of support is the same as other groups with respect to involving non-educators in the design of programs/curriculum.

In a second series of items, counselors were informed that STW implementation could potentially change their roles/responsibilities. Counselors were asked to indicate their support for or opposition to nine specific counselor roles. Results are summarized in Table 4 (page 3).

Finally, counselors' attitudes toward STW were explored in terms of responding to three pairs of positively and negatively phrased statements. Like other groups polled, most counselors agree with positively phrased statements and disagree with negatively phrased ones. More interesting, however, are the percentages of counselors who take exception to various statements. For example:

- 13.6% agree that STW is "simply another government boondoggle"
- 12.4% agree that STW will hurt rural communities because rural students will migrate to cities for jobs
- 11.6% agree that STW is no different from work study, vocational training, and other work-related programs
- 17% disagree that STW will help communities attract new businesses by building a better-prepared workforce

Table 3

Arizona counselors' support for specific changes embodied by STW: A comparison with other constituent groups

Proposed Change		% Support	% Oppose/ Uncertain
Changes in teachers' duties to emphasize instruction in teamwork, work habits and other work-related concerns	Counselors	94%	6%
	All others	89%	11%
Comprehensive learning programs to prepare students for work after they leave the public school system	Counselors	92%	8%
	All others	82%	18%
The creation of employment opportunities for students	Counselors	91%	9%
	All others	80%	20%
Programs/curriculum designed in collaboration with business and community leaders, employers, and parents for the purpose of integrating school-based, work-based and connecting activities	Counselors	86%	14%
	All others	86%	14%
"Career majors" for students	Counselors	84%	16%
	All others	80%	20%

Note: "All others" are Arizona parents, businesses, teachers, principals, and superintendents (N= 2,788)

Table 4

Arizona counselors' support for potential changes in the roles and responsibilities of counselors

Counselor Role	% Support	% Oppose/ Uncertain
Coordinating career awareness, exploration and preparation programs for students	92%	8%
Working with teachers to incorporate career concepts and information into the curricula	90%	10%
Working with parents as partners in career planning and decision-making for students	90%	10%
Working with parents and employers to help solve student academic and work-related problems	88%	12%
Working with business and community leaders and others to design and implement STW programs	84%	16%
Coordinating student career planners/portfolios	80%	20%
Assuring the involvement of ALL students in STW programs	75%	25%
Developing and monitoring key student employment programs like mentoring and apprenticeship programs	73%	27%
Developing employment opportunities for students	72%	28%

- 13.9% disagree that STW will help educators be more effective because others will share in the responsibility to educate students
- 9% disagree that STW will result in a more educated and better-prepared workforce

Support for the STW Initiative

Spring 1996 polling revealed that about 80 percent of all parents, businesses, teachers, and school administrators "support" or "strongly support" the STW initiative. As for counselors, 93 percent are supportive of the initiative (51% strongly support; 42% support). Yet in spite of their support, counselors listed numerous barriers which could derail STW implementation in the schools. By frequency of occurrence, the top five barriers perceived among counselors that interfere with their ability to implement STW are: 1) lack of time, 2) lack of funding/resources, 3) lack of teacher support, 4) lack of employment opportunities for students, and 5) caseloads.

Preliminary Conclusions

Counselors are very aware of the STW initiative. And, while a majority believe that Arizona's public education is of high quality, virtually all see a need for schools to change to better meet the needs of Arizona's students. A more comprehensive approach to education, including better preparation for work, is supported by counselors.

Not only do counselors support a number of specific changes in the ways schools operate, they also support changes in their own roles/responsibilities. They are most supportive of roles in which they are cast as facilitators or team members (e.g., working with other groups) and least supportive of roles where student employment is concerned.

Central to this study's findings are perceived barriers which counselors believe would impede their ability to implement STW in the schools. In particular, time and caseloads were cited as top barriers. These issues appear to be real concerns, as based upon an analysis of how counselors currently spend their time (see endnote #3).

In conclusion, a working hypothesis in Arizona is that school counselors and career-oriented counseling are key elements necessary for the state's STW initiative to succeed. This baseline study of counselors' opinions and attitudes toward STW bodes well for Arizona in terms of their apparent support for the initiative and willingness to be involved. However, strategies need to be developed at both state and local levels to ensure counselors' meaningful participation in systems-building efforts. Barring reduced caseloads, more one-on-one time with students, and adequate compensation for additional duties, expanded career counseling—as a key element of STW—may not become a reality.

Endnotes

1. See Vandegrift and Wright (August 1996). *Public Perceptions of School To Work: Baseline Results*. [Arizona STW Briefing Paper #2.] Phoenix, AZ: Arizona State University, Morrison Institute for Public Policy and Wright (September 1996). *A Comprehensive Baseline Analysis of Public Perceptions and Arizona's School To Work Initiative*. Phoenix, AZ: Wright Consulting Services.
2. A subsample of counselors were surveyed at the summer Arizona Counselors' Academy held in Tucson in June 1996. This annual professional training conference included information about STW. For the purposes of this paper, survey responses from counselors attending the Counselors' Academy are included in the reported results. Future plans are to compare responses of counselors who attended the 1996 Academy with those from the random sample in order to determine whether or not there are any notable differences in attitudes toward STW based upon attendance at the Academy.
3. See Vandegrift and Wright (January 1997). *Arizona Public School Counselors—How Do They Spend Their Time? Baseline Results*. [Arizona STW Briefing Paper #4.] Phoenix, AZ: Arizona State University, Morrison Institute for Public Policy.



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